

S E R M O N,

PREACHED IN THE

CATHEDRAL CHURCH of ST. PETER,

E X E T E R,

On FRIDAY, FEBRUARY 28, 1794,

BEING THE DAY APPOINTED

B Y

HIS MAJESTY'S PROCLAMATION,

FOR A

G E N E R A L F A S T.

By GEORGE GORDON, M.A.

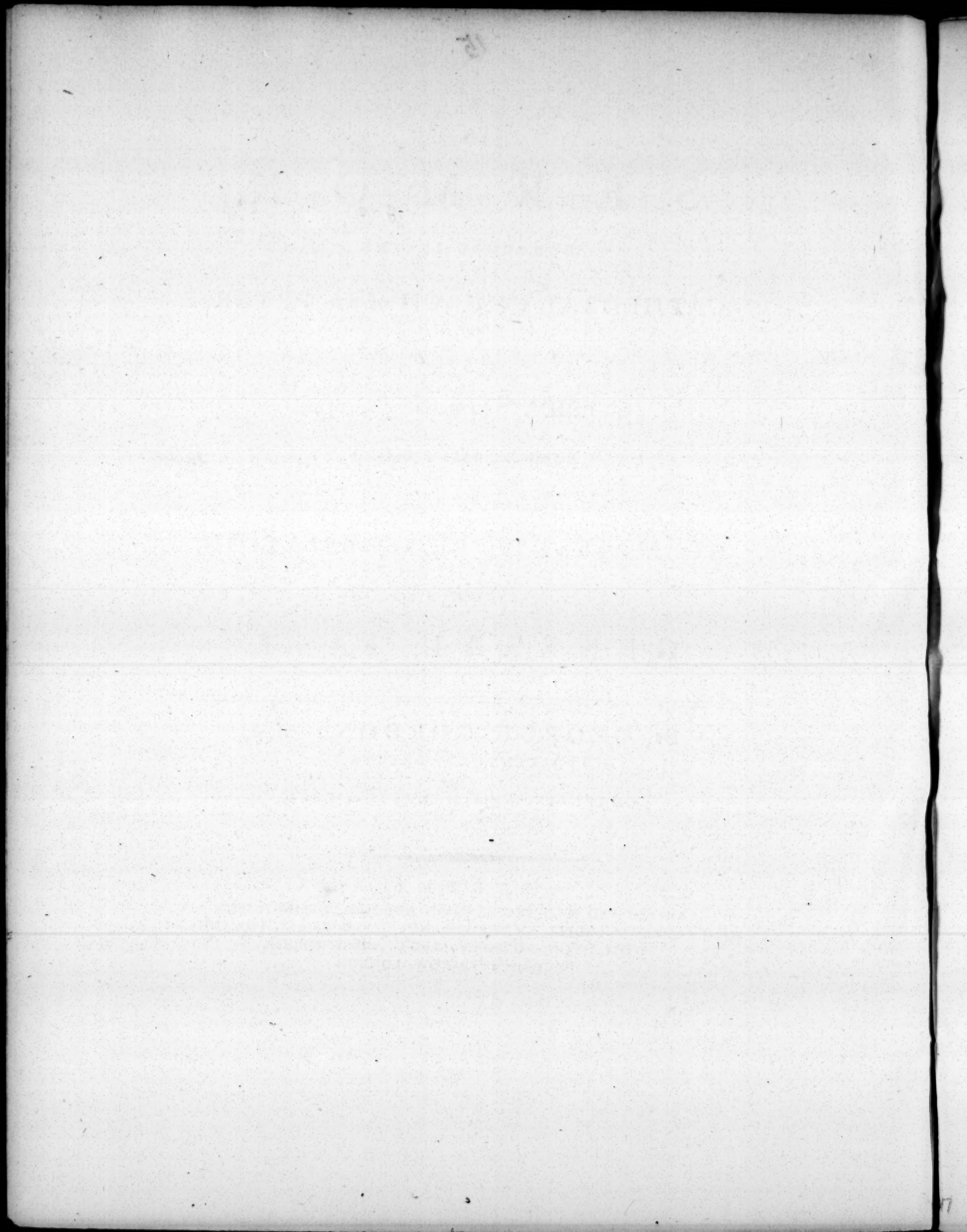
PRECENTOR OF EXETER,

AND

CHAPLAIN TO THE MARQUIS OF BATH.

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M,DCC,XCIV.



TO
THE MOST HONORABLE
THE MARQUIS OF BATH,

THIS
S E R M O N

IS INSCRIBED,
WITH THE UTMOST RESPECT AND GRATITUDE,

BY
HIS LORDSHIP'S

MOST OBLIGED,

AND FAITHFUL CHAPLAIN,

GEORGE GORDON.

GEORGE GORDON

A SERMON, &c.

I KINGS, viii. 44, 45.

IF THY PEOPLE GO OUT TO BATTLE AGAINST
THEIR ENEMY, WHITHERSOEVER THOU SHALT
SEND THEM, AND SHALL PRAY UNTO THE LORD
TOWARD THE CITY WHICH THOU HAST CHOSEN,
AND TOWARD THE HOUSE THAT I HAVE BUILT
FOR THY NAME,

THEN HEAR THOU IN HEAVEN THEIR PRAYER
AND THEIR SUPPLICATION, AND MAINTAIN
THEIR CAUSE.

THESE words form a part of King Solomon's pious
prayer at the dedication of the Temple, and well
deserve the serious consideration of all, to whose cir-
cumstances they are in any wise applicable. Their
meaning is obvious; they are expressive of an humble
entreaty to Almighty God, that He would hearken to
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the prayer of his people ; not universally, as often as they should go out to battle against their enemies, but specifically, when they should go out for this purpose, “ *whithersoever He should send them ;*” that is, whenever they should engage in war, not from motives of ambition or vain glory, but for just and lawful reasons. Considered in this point of view, they teach a lesson of the highest importance, and particularly merit our attention on this day.

We are here assembled for the purpose of humbling ourselves before the Throne of Grace, to obtain pardon of our sins, and to implore the Blessing of God on our endeavours in the cause, which we have taken in hand. Surely then, at such a time, we should have a well-grounded persuasion, that this cause is a just one ; else we but mock the Almighty by craving his assistance, and thus add to the number of those sins we are seeking the forgiveness of. That our manifold iniquities have most righteously deserved the severest tokens of divine vengeance, a proper sense of our own unworthiness will assuredly lead us to confess : and if we have not only “ *done amiss with our forefathers, and dealt wickedly,*”
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but have wantonly braved the fury of God's anger, by engaging in war unnecessarily, then is "*our sin become exceeding sinful,*" and we can hardly look up to Him for deliverance from a calamity, in which we have knowingly and designedly involved ourselves. But, on the contrary, if this heavy judgment, though justly due to our transgressions, has not been insultingly called for, then, with better hopes, may we make it our prayer to the Father of Mercies, that He *would maintain our right and our cause,* and not give us over into the hand of the enemy; that He would blot out our past sins from his remembrance, and, in his good time, restore and perpetuate the blessings of peace to us and our posterity.

In order to satisfy ourselves on this most essential point, let us enter into an examination of those particulars, by which the justice of our cause must be decided, first laying down this as a general proposition, that every war, which is unnecessary, is unjust. Wars of aggression therefore, properly so called, are utterly repugnant to justice: I say wars of aggression, properly so called, because it may sometimes happen, that the party acting
purely

purely on the defensive is compelled, for his own safety, to begin the contest, and on this account may be styled the aggressor, though no more to be considered as such in reality, than he who strikes the hand that is just ready to fall on his own head. Wars, undertaken for the vindication of what is termed national honor, though of a more specious nature, yet in the extent to which the principle is too frequently carried, are hardly, if at all to be reconciled with the genuine spirit of Christian charity. But wars of defence, wars for the preservation of national existence, though evils ever to be lamented, are evils which must be encountered, and are fairly and strictly justifiable, on the same grounds, on which we are authorized to use force, for the preservation of our individual existence, against any one who seeks to deprive us of it unjustly. It will follow from hence, that whenever an enemy, unprovoked, aims at the very vitals of a nation, by endeavouring to subvert it's established government, and to excite a spirit of disaffection amongst it's people, that nation is fully warranted in taking up arms against the wanton disturber of it's peace.

Having

Having premised these previous principles, let us now proceed to bring our conduct to the test, by examining, what we justly look upon as the immediate cause of the contest we are engaged in, the Revolution, which has taken place in our enemy's country. If it be fair to the eye, and have in itself the seeds of virtue and true happiness, waving for a moment the question of right, we have at least been wanting to our own interest, in making enemies of those, who earnestly strove to extend it's influence to us. But if, on the other hand, it exhibit a model of deformity from without, and "*within be full of all uncleanness;*" and if it's arms were stretched out wide, to enclose us in it's deadly embraces, then have our exertions against it the sacred sanction of justice : and amidst the calamities inseparable from a state of warfare, we have the solid satisfaction of reflecting, that we are struggling in defence of our Religion, liberties, and laws, of every thing, in short, that renders society or even life itself desirable, against a vortex which would have swallowed all up in one common ruin.

In contemplating this scene, the feature that first strikes us, and marks, more strongly than any other, the singularity of this Revolution, is the open and avowed disregard of Religion, which it presents to our view. We have often seen Religion made the foundation of war, and an overheated zeal in support of one particular opinion, assigned as a reason for persecuting the professors of every other. But a war against all Religion, carried on in the very centre of Christendom, by a people hitherto numbered among the most enlightened of nations, is a novelty in history, a solecism in the annals of mankind, which the present age may well wonder at, and which posterity will hardly give credit to.

If we trust to report, the most direct proofs of this atheistical spirit have not been wanting: indeed, the present state of knowledge in the world considered, a denial of the soul's immortality seems in itself to fall very little short of denying the being of a God. But we should always believe with caution, where there is the slightest reason to suspect partiality. And as it is hardly possible to conceive, but that accounts of so odious a nature must be in some degree exaggerated, let us
rather

rather recur to a fact, which is adduced on the other side of the question, and therefore not liable to the same objection; and let us see, whether in reality it does not furnish a strong, though indirect proof of the charge, which it is intended to refute.

If then in a country, where for ages past the true God has been universally acknowledged, we find the rulers of the people, coming forward to avow their belief in that Deity, (not as an act of religious worship, but in a popular assembly,) is it not obvious to infer, that their previous conduct must have been such, as to render their faith suspected? Were it not to remove some imputation of this kind from themselves, it surely appears perfectly trifling and nugatory, at such a time, to make a formal declaration of assent to a proposition, the truth of which no one else doubted. But if it be rather thought, that a general turn for infidelity was beginning to prevail, which they thus wished to make a shew of opposing; yet this by no means proves that they themselves were not the original promoters of this spirit, or that they were really in earnest in their attempts to restrain it. For, after all, what does such a declaration

amount to ? To say, I believe in God, is an easy task : but if by the uniform tenor of my practice, I deny his over-ruling Providence ; if I defile his Temples, and profane his Sabbaths ; set at nought his Worship, and evil entreat his Ministers ; I may be a believer in word, but I am an infidel and an atheist in deed.

Religious worship, fitly adapted to the nature of man, is partly spiritual, and partly external ; in order that whilst we adore the Deity with all our minds, our bodies also may be employed in the service of Him, who made them. And they who go about to explode the one part as fanaticism, and the other as superstition, whatever fair professions they may make, will gain but little credit from the world for the sincerity of their principles. They may talk to us of Truth and Reason : but Truth and Reason are terms which come with a very bad grace from their tongues, who are using every artifice in their power to poison the Fountain of Truth ; and who, for the solemn ceremonies of Religion, are substituting certain other wild and fantastick rites, which, if they be not designed for the express purpose of introducing idolatry, are evidently calculated to bring every thing rational into contempt.

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It is true, that since the total abolition of religious Worship, the Temples of the Deity have again been opened, and the national Religion (I do not say countenanced, but) tolerated. Yet this, I fear, can scarcely be ascribed to any returning love of what is right in the rulers of the nation : it comes wholly unaccompanied by any other act of grace, which might induce such a belief ; and by what they have already done, they have too plainly shewn what they would do, if their abilities were equal to their inclinations. The cause of this indulgence is therefore rather to be found, in the humour of the people not yet sufficiently trained to such violent measures, and in the little reason that remained for farther opposition, after the purposes of pillage had in a great degree been answered by a temporary interdict.

We may have noticed too, an apparent zeal for the reformation of manners, in an attempt to suppress some kinds of vice. But whilst profaneness and impiety are either held in esteem, or at least suffered to pass unpunished ; and proscription in all its horrid shapes is sanctioned by the forms of justice ; is it not obvious to remark, in this pretended regard for morality, too much of that
hypocritical

hypocritical spirit, which would "*strain at a gnat, and swallow a camel.*"

That example and instruction may go hand in hand, let us draw the following short moral, from what has been already said. If, in viewing this scene, we are shocked at the foul enormities it exhibits, and fancy we can trace the just judgment of Almighty God, giving over these workers of mischief "*to a reprobate mind,*" because "*they did not like to retain God in their knowledge,*" we must put away all such iniquity far from us, as we would escape a like condemnation: lest while we vainly imagine, "*that these Galileans are sinners above all the Galileans, we ourselves,*" for lack of repentance, should "*all likewise perish.*"

Let us now, secondly, consider this Revolution, as it affects the civil rights, or rather, (putting the effect for the cause) the temporal welfare of those, who live under it's influence. In every great innovation, and more especially in such violent alterations, as go to the entire subversion of all ancient establishments, we ought to be well assured, before we engage, that our undertak-
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ing, if successful, will materially enlarge the bounds of human happiness; and that we can attain our purpose by just and virtuous means. Without a well-grounded security in these respects, we had infinitely better forego the attempt; lest, on the one hand, in avoiding ills we have been long accustomed to bear, we fall into others far heavier, which we know not of; or, on the other hand, by adopting dishonest and unjustifiable expedients, disgrace the cause in which we are embarked. Let us examine then, in the instance at present more immediately before us, how far these two leading principles appear to have been attended to.

The happiness of any community may properly be considered, as made up of the happiness of all the different orders of individuals, who compose it. And, of two societies, that consequently is to be deemed the happiest, in which the welfare of the whole is most essentially provided for. Now, in applying this rule to the country which is the seat of this Revolution, very little need be said respecting the higher ranks of the people. As far as these are concerned, the change is so evidently for the worse, that whoever can himself adopt, or think
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of persuading others to adopt a contrary opinion, must indeed be blindly enamoured of novelty, or utterly unacquainted with the nature of what the generality of mankind have agreed to call by the name of happiness. But these, I am well aware, under all governments, form a comparatively small part of the whole body : and on this account, in estimating the aggregate of general happiness, we must always advert with peculiar attention to the far more numerous classes, which compose the lower orders of the community.

To meet the question fully and fairly therefore, we should inquire what solid advantages have accrued from the Revolution to persons of this description. If the iron hand of oppression before lay heavily upon them, and that pressure is now removed, or materially lightened; if freedom, genuine rational freedom, has succeeded to a state of abject slavery; then indeed in the consideration of benefits so important, and at the same time so extensive, if we cannot forget, we shall at least find some consolation for, the evils by which they have been acquired. But if the reverse of all this is notoriously true; if without any increase of their property, without any
diminution

diminution of their burdens, their personal liberty has been more daringly invaded than ever it was in times of the most absolute monarchy, then is every pleasing hope of this sort vanished. Without one cheering ray to gladden our eyes, we must contemplate with horror a scene of universal gloom: hardly knowing which most to wonder at, the wanton wickedness of those factious leaders, who have involved themselves in so much guilt, and their country in so much misery; or the unhappy weakness of the deluded people, who can submit to be made the instruments of their own destruction.

It seems then, from viewing the condition both of the higher and lower ranks in society, that, to say the least, the limits of human happiness are in no degree extended, by the Revolution that has been effected. We are next to note the means, by which it has been brought about: because if honest, and praiseworthy in themselves, and really directed to the publick good, that they have failed of attaining this end, ought not alone to render them infamous. But all happiness, that is bought by injustice, is bought too dearly. I speak not of sensual
C pleasure.

pleasure only: in these cases, the maxim is so manifestly just, as to need no illustration. I allude more particularly to that species of pleasure, which arises from gratifying what are called the finer feelings of the mind; where we are sometimes so dazzled by the splendor of the object in view, as purposely to lay aside all attention to the rectitude of the measures by which it is to be gained. Yet we are expressly forbidden to “*do evil that good may come* ;” and therefore for the most amiable purposes of charity, it can never be allowable to defraud another of what is properly his due. To give happiness to the many, is indeed an object of the most glorious ambition: but, even with the certainty of this before us, we ought not wantonly to rob the few of theirs, by taking from them what is strictly and fairly their right. I am no more to deprive a man of part of his property, merely because he is richer than me, than I am to cut him down to my own level, only because he is taller. And let me afterwards make what use I will of whatever I thus acquire, the injustice of the original act remains the same.

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By some perhaps, this mode of reasoning will be thought to militate against all revolutions, however necessary or expedient ; because, from their very nature, they cannot be carried into effect without the subtraction of advantage from one party or other. But the argument, if rightly considered, by no means goes this length. It does not at all apply to those cases, where rights are either voluntarily resigned ; or where having been at first unjustly acquired, or afterwards oppressively exercised, the general welfare of the community renders it essentially necessary that they should be abridged, or wholly taken away : but is directed only against such arbitrary exertions of this restraining power, as the publick good does not demand. It is diametrically opposed to the plan of setting up false and chimerical notions of liberty and rights, and then, without any regard to the principles of justice or common honesty, daringly breaking through every obstacle, that may be thought to prevent the attainment of what in fact is absolutely and utterly unattainable. And surely the cruelties and mischiefs which we have seen resulting from this kind of system, when carried into practice, as it has been in the Revolution we are considering, must of themselves be amply sufficient to

condemn it, in the opinion of every man who is not lost to the common feelings of a man. To call upon a whole people, at once to abandon the honest prejudices of their early years, to throw off all reverence for Religion, and all regard to lawful authority; and to enforce compliance with this call by the most rigid exertions of arbitrary power: to annex the severest punishments to crimes before unheard of, and to construe even moderation into guilt: these, and other like these, can never be accounted just means of pursuing any end, however desirable. And if happiness, at this price, would not be worth the having, misery thus bought must be dear indeed!

The Philosopher will probably suggest, that the calamities we so much deplore, are necessarily incident to all great revolutions in human affairs: but foreseeing much future good, likely to arise from this chaos of present evil, he will teach us that it is our duty, as stewards for generations yet unborn, boldly to bear on with stern and unrelenting vigor. This may perhaps be the genuine language of modern Philosophy, but, I
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am very sure, it has nothing in it, either of Reason or Religion.

We certainly owe to posterity the negative duty, of not doing any thing unnecessarily, or for our own gratification, by which their happiness is likely to be materially injured: and, farther than this, as trustees for their benefit, we are bound to embrace every favorable opportunity of advancing their interests, as often as this can be done without violating any duty of prior obligation; and consistently with that regard, which, as having an equal concern ourselves in the same stake, we are fully justified in paying to our own interest. But we are entirely ignorant of the very essence and whole scope of this duty, if we for a moment conceive, that it is to be fulfilled at the expence of virtue. To defy our God, and debase our nature by casting away those tender feelings of humanity which most exalt it, can never be a mode of acting, that will be of real use to posterity, or that ought to be adopted, if it would.

If I am the owner of an estate, has the next in the line of succession any right to expect, that I should
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condemn it, in the opinion of every man who is not lost to the common feelings of a man. To call upon a whole people, at once to abandon the honest prejudices of their early years, to throw off all reverence for Religion, and all regard to lawful authority; and to enforce compliance with this call by the most rigid exertions of arbitrary power: to annex the severest punishments to crimes before unheard of, and to construe even moderation into guilt: these, and other like these, can never be accounted just means of pursuing any end, however desirable. And if happiness, at this price, would not be worth the having, misery thus bought must be dear indeed!

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ruin my own peace of mind, in attempting to increase it for him by unjustifiable means? Can I be called upon to give up all the happiness, I might hope to derive from the quiet enjoyment of it, that my infant heir may have the possible benefit of a long minority; when after all, the inheritance is likely to be so abused by the mismanagement of false friends, as to come to him in a much worse state, than that, in which it was originally left? For the attainment of a certain good, no honest principle could justify such notorious evil: much less is such conduct reconcileable even with the semblance of justice, where the benefit, pretended to be expected, is very remote and very uncertain. And in the case of that Revolution, which these reasonings are intended more particularly to apply to, many generations, I fear, must pass away, before posterity will remember, with any other sensations than those of the most lively regret, the exertions which are alleged to be made in their behalf. But before we suffer ourselves to become the dupes of such artifices as these, it deserves a thought, whether this boasted zeal for posterity is any thing more than a specious name; which, as standing for a duty of somewhat indefinite extent, is on this account used as a
cover

cover for crimes which the cruellest would start at, were the real purposes for which they are committed, precisely defined, and explicitly avowed.

The last circumstance I shall take notice of in considering this Revolution, and which proves perhaps the weakness more than the wickedness of those who conduct it, is the declared rejection of every thing that bears the stamp of antiquity. It is but reasonable to suppose, that when the government of any country was first formed, it's system was not so perfect, as to be incapable of subsequent improvement; and that in some respects, time itself may have injured what was originally good. It will follow therefore, that under certain circumstances, and within certain limits, alterations may be highly expedient and salutary. But under this pretence, to pull down all that our ancestors have set up, to undo indiscriminately whatever they have done, is to presume at once that they knew nothing, we ourselves every thing; a degree of vanity which it would be difficult to stigmatize as it deserves. We may perhaps occasionally have remarked a spirit not wholly different from this in authors, who wishing to claim the merit of original thinking,

thinking, and to avoid what they call vulgar prejudices, openly declare their wilful disregard of all that others have written, on the subject they are treating of. And in such cases, we cannot fail to have observed this invariable consequence ; that, however ingenious in the main, they have nevertheless fallen into many old errors and absurdities, which preceding writers had long before refuted, and which therefore, by submitting to be instructed, they might easily have avoided. This, amongst other evils far more serious, will undoubtedly happen to those fanciful speculators in political science, who, rather than improve on what is already established, choose to raze the very foundations of government, and are anxious to manifest their love of novelty, by breaking the links that have bound society together from its earliest infancy. Surely, to call it by no worse name, there is folly enough in such conduct as this, to deter all reasonable men from imitating the example.

In whatever light then we view this Revolution, whether we consider the means employed in bringing it about, or the end produced; whether we advert to its effects on Religion, or civil liberty; it can hardly fail to
strike

strike us, as replete with wild and extravagant theories, and pregnant with principles, which, when carried into practice, tend equally to the subversion of happiness here, and of the hopes of happiness hereafter. Yet, bad as this system must necessarily appear to be, so long as it was confined to the soil in which it sprang, pity for those who suffered by it, would hardly have justified opposition to those who promoted it. But when it came to be the avowed design of our enemy to give it universal extension, and this design was incontestably proved by overt acts, resistance then became a duty, important in proportion to the evils it was intended to ward off. There was then no longer any other alternative, but to stem the torrent or be swept away by it; boldly to face the storm with firm and steady resolution, or be content at once to barter order for anarchy, Religion for atheism, genuine liberty for the worst species of tyranny, and right reason for the visionary speculations of a false and dangerous philosophy.

Recurring therefore to the general principles laid down at the beginning of this discourse, and measuring our conduct by that standard, I think we shall not scruple to

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pronounce,

pronounce, that this is a war, not of wanton aggression on our part, not lightly entered upon to support proud notions of national honor, but a war purely and entirely defensive ; a war of stern necessity, and consequently of the strictest justice.

Whilst then, as Christians and as men, we heartily pray for the restoration of peace, and ardently long for the arrival of that happy period, when this most desirable purpose may be safely accomplished, let us in the mean time take every opportunity, and particularly that which this day's solemnity affords, of commending ourselves and our cause to the protection of Him, "*who judgeth right.*" Let us ever remember, that it is God only, "*who giveth victory,*" that He alone "*is powerful to save.*" And, with humble confidence therefore in the purity of the motives by which we are actuated, "*let us fall down low before his footstool,*" earnestly entreating Him, in the words of the wise King, "THAT HE WOULD HEAR IN HEAVEN OUR PRAYER AND OUR SUPPLICATION, AND MAINTAIN OUR CAUSE."

THE END.

